

“Cochise died this afternoon...”

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THE DERWENT LETTER

By Dan L. Thrapp

Cochise, the vigorous, able chieftain of the warlike Chiricahua Apaches, was beyond much question the outstanding Indian leader during early Anglo settlement of Arizona, and his passing was a matter of moment. With his death commenced in earnest the concentration policy by which those charged with management of Indian affairs sought to gather peoples of diverse traditions upon a single reservation. This was done to make it more economically feasible to care for them and better guide them into the superior white culture-system, or so went the argument. Other concerns not so frequently voiced were the removal of the natives and their pernicious influence from areas the whites wished to settle upon or exploit, and to make the Indian control, that is, policing, more practicable.

All this could not seriously commence until Cochise was out of the way. His large reservation unfortunately was located directly on the border of Mexico into which country his young men and their friends from other bands raided at will. He had been assured it by an agreement with Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard, the pact approved by President Grant himself, and without Cochise's permission his people could not be removed while he lived. Thus his death was a matter of concern in the Southwest, and remains one of interest today not only because of the floodgate of action it opened, but for the drama attendant to it. The Library of the University of Arizona is fortunate to possess in its collection a most interesting letter reproduced here, which gives fresh insights upon the event of his death. A transcription of the Derwent letter was published in *Arizona and the West* in the spring of 1969, with comments by the late Professor Russell C. Ewing of the University's Department of History, but this is the first reproduction of the hand-written communication itself.

On September 14, 1870, James E. Derwent at the age of 26 was enlisted at Cleveland, Ohio, by First Lieutenant William H. Campion (who was to be cashiered within two years), and assigned to Company D of the 5th U.S. Cavalry, soon to garrison Arizona posts. He was discharged upon expiration of his term of service September 14, 1875 at Fort Hays, Kansas, by then a sergeant. Born at Augusta, Maine, he gave his civilian occupation upon entering the army as an "engineer," and since the letter we have was written to Charles Fellows, a master mechanic of the Lake Shore and Tuscarawas Railroad in Ohio, it seems safe to assume that Derwent had been a locomotive engineer. His elevation to that exalted (for the era) position, and his rise in a single enlistment from private to sergeant, shows that he was a man not without ability in the view of his peers, and this adds weight to the judgments he airs in his communication.

As Ewing explained, the letter was purchased from Zeitlin & Ver Brugge, Los Angeles booksellers, by David R. Ewing, a physician and probably the son of the professor who presented it to the University Library.

One of the puzzling aspects of the Derwent letter is the date: "June 10, '74 4,oclock P.M." The soldier begins by saying, "Cachise died this afternoon at 3,oclock. will be buried at sunrise tomorrow." He implies that he was present in the Cochise camp at the passing of the great chief, but he was wrong in his dating and timing of the event, according to excellent authorities. Thomas J. Jeffords, the frontiersman and blood-brother of Cochise and who knew him better perhaps than any other white man, reported that the Chiricahua died June 8 at approximately 10 a.m. Jeffords, agent for the Chiricahuas, wrote the Bureau of Indian Affairs on June 10 (the same day Derwent dated his letter): "Cochise...expired on the 8th inst." Levi Edwin Dudley, an able Indian office official from New Mexico, visited Cochise for several days with Jeffords, departing about June 4. On the way home he was overtaken by news of the demise, reporting that "four days after my departure, *vis* June 8th, Cochise died..." An unidentified Fort Bowie officer, in a private letter published in the *Army & Navy Journal* wrote: "Cochise, the great war chief of the Chiricahua Apache Indians, died on the 8th inst."

Derwent's suggestion of turmoil which he believed hastened the passing of Cochise and resulted in casualties among the Apaches, also seems at variance with the facts—or to anticipate them, rather, by about two years. In 1876 the dispute which arose closely resembled that which Derwent said occurred in 1874.

PREFACE

Dan Thrapp, who wrote the essay which follows, will need no introduction to readers interested in the Apache Indians of Arizona. His published items concerning the Apaches have appeared in many journals and newspapers. He has published four major books on the Apaches: *Conquest of Apacheria* (1967), *General Crook and the Sierra Madre Adventure* (1971), *Jub, an Incredible Indian* (1973), and *Victorio and the Mimbres Apaches* (1974). It is our good fortune to have his expert commentary on the unique piece of Americana which we proudly publish as a keepsake and memorial for the new main library at the University of Arizona.

The original letter, now brown with age, is housed in the Department of Special Collections, University of Arizona Library. It was purchased in 1968 by David R. Ewing from antiquarian bookseller Jacob Zeitlin and donated to the University Library in honor of Mr. Ewing's father, Russell Ewing, former Head of the History Department. We are limiting our publication to 500 copies. The transcription maintains the original spellings. Read, enjoy and preserve your copy in good health.

W. David Laird
University Librarian

TRANSCRIPTION OF LETTER

Chirricahau, Reservation
June 10, '74 4,oclock P.M.

Chas Fellows Esqr.
M.M. L S & T R R
Respected Sir & Friend

Cachise died this afternoon at 3,oclock will be buried at sunrise, tomorrow. he was looking forward to recovery. but yesterday proved too much for him. two of his younger warriors, had a severe engagement for the mastery Several Warriors killed & one of the Chief very badly wounded. Madesates [?] will probably be Chief—unless circumstances changes the tribe. this struggle between one of his sons & chief proved too much for the old fellow. he seemed to loose all hope. A relapse took place. the result death.—the Medicine man who was in attendance, burns at the stake tonight. this is what I am out here to witness, such is the payment an Indian doctor receives for the failure in curing—this will be short but will give you a lengthy account of it as soon as I return to Bowie. Kind and best wishes for your welfare also Mrs. F. Dave & me are well—Weather warm. 119 in the shade—

I am writing in the saddle, awaiting the return of messenger to Crook. my command are outside the Council chamber. Mounted in readiness to prevent warriors leaving the Reservation,—so excuse the poor penmanship my desire is to let you know the event as soon as possible. we feel jubilant over it & think we can easily master any bad spirits who want the War Path.

Good bye and accept
for yourself & Family my earnest regards
[signed] James. E. Derwent—

Dave knows I am writing & stands as still as possible. I am writing on a small leather (Army) writing desk. fastened to front of saddle for the purpose.—about 6 [?] inches square—very handy & ready at all times for use. I am very happy & feel so well, that Indians are at present a small thing in my minds eye—the whole Indian Country will be more or less affected with the death of Cachise—

Chinichaw, Reservation
June 10th⁷⁴ 14, o'clock P.M.

Chas. Fellows Esq.

M. M. & S. W. R.

Respected Sir & Friend
Cachie died this afternoon at 3 o'clock
will be buried at sunrise tomorrow. He was
looking forward to recovery, but yesterday proved
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Several warriors killed & one of the Chief very
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Reservation, - So excuse the poor handwriting
my desire is to let you know the event as
soon as possible. we feel jubilant over it
& think we can easily master any bad
spirits who want to take the War Path.

Good bye and accept
for yourself & family my earnest
regards.
James, Edgewood -

Dave knows I am writing & stands as still
as possible. I am writing on a small leather
(Army) writing desk. Fastened to front of saddle
for the purpose. - about 6 inch square - very handy
& ready at all times for use. I am very happy
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will more or less be affected with the death of Caches -

Jeffords reported in his letter of June 10th: "There is at present no danger of trouble resulting [from the chief's death], his eldest son, Taza by name has been proclaimed his successor, and also [is] acknowledged with great satisfaction by all the Captains [Apache leaders] upon the reservation," indicating that the succession was tranquil and had been expected by all the Indians present. Derwent's citing an Apache he called "Madesates" as probable new chief is perplexing. There was no Chiricahua on record of that name or anything resembling it. Cochise had two sons, Taza, who died later at Washington, D.C., having never married nor produced offspring, and Naiche, a younger son, who followed Taza and became the last chief of the Chiricahuas. It is possible that the Madesates cited by Derwent was a variant name for either Taza or Naiche.

Jeffords said that, presumably on June 10th or late on the 9th, after the secret burial of Cochise, "I called the people together and held a council with all the men of the tribe." It is probable that he had asked for a small military escort in view of the delicacy of the situation (Jeffords was not at the Chiricahua camp when Cochise died, but went there from his agency headquarters). Thus it is likely that Derwent as a noncommissioned officer commanded the escort, and in his letter simply passed along soldier gossip or speculation about the momentous event.

The most intriguing part of his communication to Fellows is the observation that the "Medicine man... burns at the stake tonight..."

Dudley had reported that upon leaving the Cochise camp on June 4th he encountered "a war party seven warriors under the command of Tozay [Taza]... We were informed that it had been ascertained that Cochise's illness was due to the fact that an Indian of the Chiricahua band had bewitched him, and they were going for the witch to compel him to cure their chief... I asked what would be the fate of the supposed witch if he failed to cure Cochise and was told they would hang him in a tree and burn him to death. There seemed no way of stopping them at the time and they went on to the other camp and secured their man, and returned with him firmly tied upon his horse. The Agent [Jeffords] believed he could save his life at the proper time and I have no doubt did so."

According to Derwent, Jeffords would have had very few hours left to effect the release of the Apache witch, or "Medicine man," to use the soldier's expression, and we can only surmise the fate of the hapless captive. The soldier's observation that "such is the payment an Indian doctor receives for the failure in curing," is rather accurate. His comments that the soldier escort felt "jubilant" over the chieftain's death may have reflected the sentiments of the enlisted men at the scene, but the rejoicing was not shared by many southwesterners of the day, most of whom realized, or quickly came to appreciate that Cochise since the Howard pact had been the strongest influence for peace between Chiricahuas and Anglo settlers. With his strong hand removed the pioneers could expect difficulties to mount, and they did. But the soldier's prediction that "the whole Indian Country will be more or less affected with the death" was precisely on the mark.

The "Dave" he mentions twice in his letter obviously was his horse, in Cavalryman tradition, his best and closest friend.

Cochise's elaborate burial as described in the *Army & Navy Journal* letter written just ten days after the event, closely approximates the account Jeffords gave Al Williamson shortly afterward, as recorded in Frank C. Lockwood's *The Apache Indians* in 1938, with one intriguing exception: Jeffords, who apparently intended that no whites desecrate the grave of his Indian brother, said the burial took place "in a rough and lonely place among the rocks and chasms in the [Cochise] stronghold" of the Dragoon Mountains. The author of the contemporary letter on the other hand implied that it was somewhere on the approaches to the mountains rather than in a deep fissure in the massif itself. In the *Journal of Arizona History* for the summer of 1966, Dr. Robert H. Forbes, reporting upon his interview with Jeffords many years previously, said that agricultural operations long afterward in a peach orchard on open ground before the stronghold had "uncovered a skeleton which might have been that of Cochise."

This is possible. However if true it is odd that nothing was said about the quite elaborate burial structures and accouterments reported in 1874 by those most closely associated with the event.

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